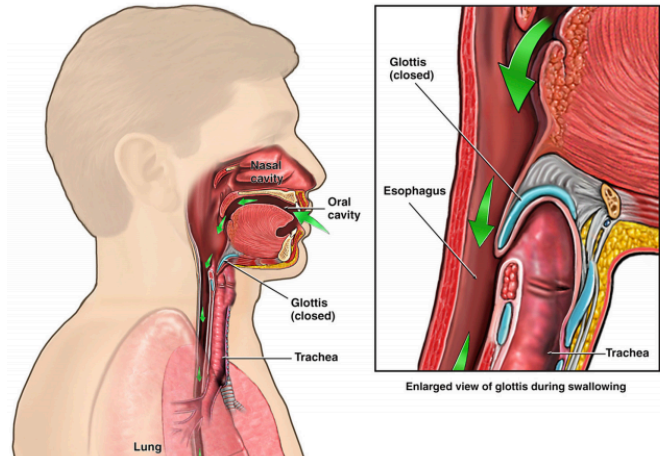


## What is Dysphagia?

Dysphagia is the medical term for difficulty swallowing. Swallowing problems can happen in your mouth, throat, or esophagus (tube from your throat to your stomach). Dysphagia can be related to difficulty moving and coordinating your muscles as well as sensation, or the ability to feel where food is in your mouth and throat. Swallowing problems can cause dehydration, malnutrition, weight loss, and pneumonia.



There are many causes of dysphagia, but the some of the more common are stroke, brain injury, cancer, and progressive neurologic diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, ALS, or multiple sclerosis (ASHA.org). Some people have dysphagia for a short time due to sudden weakness from a flare up of an unrelated problem, such as the flu or kidney disease. Others may have more long-term swallowing problems. Because many conditions cause swallowing problems, it is hard to tell how many people are affected. It is thought that one in 25 adults experience a swallowing problem every year (Bhattacharyya, 2014).

## There are two ways dysphagia affects your ability to swallow:

**Safety-** Choking and aspiration (when foods or liquids pass the vocal folds into your lungs) can cause a serious lung infection called aspiration pneumonia. When food goes down the wrong way without making a person cough or react, it is called silent aspiration. About one third of people with dysphagia develop pneumonia (AHCPR 1999). Aspiration can be a serious medical condition.

**Efficiency-** It may take extra time, effort, and swallows to swallow food or liquids. For example, if the throat muscles are weak, there might be residue in the throat after swallowing, and the need to swallow two or three additional times or use a liquid wash to clear it may be necessary.

## What can I do if I have dysphagia?

Your speech-language pathologist can recommend:

- A specialized swallowing test to better understand the problem. It can be an X-ray or a small camera that goes in the nose. Both tests are used to determine what may be causing the swallowing problem, and strategies that can be used to address it during therapy. Managing dysphagia may include:
- Swallowing exercises to improve strength and coordination
- Special strategies or head positions to make swallowing safer and easier
- Diet texture changes, such as thickening liquids or pureeing food

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